

## **Creativity and Uncertainty in New Contemporary Rituals**

Anna Fedele

**Abstract:** This paper is based on fieldwork among Portuguese, Italians, Catalans and Spaniards influenced by the transnational Goddess spirituality movement. Through an analysis of ritual narratives I will analyze the role of doubt and uncertainty in contemporary rituals created within Goddess spirituality. I will show that contemporary crafted rituals offer a privileged window upon the uncertainty intrinsic in ritual because participants feel less constrained by a long lasting religious tradition and talk more openly about their doubts and their strategies to neutralize them. Drawing on Simon Coleman's analysis of pilgrimage and ritual (2002, 2009, 2013) I suggest that uncertainty may play an important role not only in rituals created in the context of contemporary spirituality but also in other contemporary rituals created in plural and increasingly secularized Western contexts.

## Introduction

This text analyses the role of doubt and uncertainty in contemporary rituals created within Goddess spirituality<sup>1</sup>. It is based on research about the spread of the Goddess spirituality movement in traditionally Catholic countries of Southern Europe. Raised in Catholic families, the Portuguese, Italians, Catalans and Spaniards I encountered during my fieldwork criticized Christianity as misogynist and patriarchal, but kept venerating Christian figures such as the Virgin Mary, Jesus and Mary Magdalene. They creatively adapted contemporary Pagan theories and practices arriving from the United States and the United Kingdom, worshipped female divinities such as “Mother Earth” and the “Goddess”, but did not want to identify themselves as “witches” or “Pagans” (Fedele 2013a, 2013b). With their rituals they tried to combine Pagan and Christian figures, symbols and gestures.

Classical theories within the social sciences have described the different forms of the religious as providing a remedy against uncertainty. Even if ritual has been analyzed following different approaches (e.g. Geertz 1973; Bell 1992; Rappaport 1999; Handelman and Lindquist 2004), there has been a clear tendency to focus on the capacity of ritual to generate feelings of certainty and to provide its participants with a sense of continuity (Coleman 2013). The explanatory power of such approaches cannot be denied, but in this text I will explore a slightly different perspective. Little attention has been paid so far to the uncertainty intrinsic in rituals. This kind of uncertainty may be related for instance to participants’ doubts about the success of the ritual, ritual leaders’ preoccupations about the right ways in which to structure the ritual sequence or uncontrollable events that may disturb or even interrupt the ritualization process.

I will show that Goddess spirituality practitioners are well aware that they are creating their rituals and they are constantly putting to test their effects. Like Catherine Bell in her analysis of contemporary crafted rituals I found that one of the central elements of this kind of ritual is to “show that it works” (1997:241). In this context the ritual leader is no longer an incontestable authority but may become the object of critique. I will therefore argue that these rituals offer a privileged window upon the processes of ritual uncertainty because participants feel less constrained by a long lasting religious tradition and talk more openly about their doubts and their strategies to neutralize them.

Drawing on Simon Coleman’s analysis of pilgrimage and ritual (2009, 2013; and Elsner 1998) I will also discuss the importance of taking into account the role played by uncertainty in rituals celebrated in plural, increasingly secularized Western contexts.

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank William Christian, Élisabeth Claverie, Michael Houseman, Ellen Badone, Stanley Brandes and Simon Coleman, who allowed me to use his yet unpublished text about ritual and pilgrimage (2013).

## **Crafted menstrual rituals at the Sainte Baume**

As other social scientists specializing in the study of religion have shown, since the 1990's an increasing number of people in the West state that they are "not religious but spiritual" (e.g. Pike 2004; Fedele and Knibbe 2013)<sup>2</sup>. In this context religion is considered as related to hierarchy, female domination and the condemnation of body and sexuality. Spiritual practitioners conceptualize the world in terms of an all-pervading life force usually described as "energy" and consider that the divine is immanent and therefore present in the natural world and also in every human being. My interlocutors often accused monotheistic religions of being the main responsables for the exploitation of the planet and the domination of women because they had at their center a male, transcendent divinity and considered the material world as corrupt and sinful.

The use of gender as a central element for religious and social criticism (Eller 1993:6; Fedele 2013:67) is particularly evident in Goddess spirituality. My interlocutors reclaimed and ancient matriarchal past and wanted to revitalize the pre-Christian religions of their European ancestors (Fedele2013a:10-11, 68). For reasons of brevity I will focus here on Goddess Wood, one particular group I have been in contact with since 2004 and on one ritual held at La Sainte-Baume in Southern France that formed part of the "initiatory pilgrimage of the blood", one of the group's most important ritual activities. This ritual illustrates well the way in which also other spiritual practitioners in traditionally Catholic Southern Europe I met during my research created their own rituals using ritual gestures derived from so-called "indigenous" contexts and explaining the efficacy of the ritual using scientific terms as well as psychological and anthropological theories.

Goddess Wood had been founded in 2001 by Dana, an Argentinean woman in her late forties. In 2004 the group consisted of up to 300 women from different areas of Spain who participated now and then in rituals or workshops organized by Dana; there was a group of 30-40 committed women who regularly attended Goddess Wood's activities. The women's ages ranged between 24 and 65 but most of them were between 35 and 55 years old. In their majority they came from the middle and lower-middle class and had a great variety of jobs; some also had a second job as therapists using alternative healing methods (Fedele 2013a). By the time of this writing Goddess Wood had become one of the largest and most influential Goddess spirituality groups in Spain.

---

<sup>2</sup> Those labeling themselves as spiritual rather than religious have sometimes been described with the umbrella term "New Age". I avoid this term because it was perceived as derogatory by most of the spiritual practitioners I encountered (Fedele 2013:277n2). For a detailed discussion of the problems related with this terminology see Wood 2007. See also Fedele and Knibbe 2013.

In 2004 I accompanied 28 women of this group on a 6 days pilgrimage that included the visit of Les-Saintes-Maries-de-la Mer, Marseille and La Sainte-Baume, all situated in the French Provence. The central ritual of the “initiatory pilgrimage of the blood” following “the path of Mary Magdalene” was the collective offering of menstrual blood to “Mother Earth” celebrated at La Sainte-Baume, a mountain ridge situated at approximately 30 km east from Marseille<sup>3</sup>.

Even if Goddess Wood members considered Christianity and particularly Catholicism (both generally referred to as the “Church”)<sup>4</sup> as androcentric and culpable for persecuting witches and other groups considered as heretic, they also believed in the power of what they referred to as “Christian mystical teachings”. These “had been preserved by heretic groups such as the Cathars and Templars”, and their wisdom and healing power could still be found in certain Christian shrines. The basic elements the women used to construct their own theories and rituals derive from a kind of “spiritual-esoteric” literature: a corpus of texts combining anthropology, psychology, history and religious studies (Fedele 2006, 2013a). In their discourses spiritual practitioners freely used psychological and anthropological terms such as “collective unconscious”, “archetypal images”, “initiation rituals” or “rites of passage” but also scientific terms such as “DNA”, “quantum theory” or “morphogenetic field”.

The members of Goddess Wood believed that “Native American women” used to menstruate together following the moon’s cycle and gathered in moon huts bleeding directly onto the Earth sitting on moss. Referring to the existence of an ancient matriarchal society, they considered that by offering their blood to “Mother Earth”, they revitalized an ancient matriarchal ritual wiped out by Christianity’s menstruation taboo. They held that with the gradual imposition of patriarchal values, the blood flow that characterizes each woman’s fertility period and her power to give birth had been labeled impure and even dangerous (Fedele 2014).

On their first night at the Sainte-Baume, Dana’s pilgrims gathered in the meeting room of the Catholic hostel where they were staying and prepared their offering of menstrual blood to “Mother Earth”. During this ritual Dana received the help of Clara, a Catalan woman in her early fifties acting as the “ritual specialist” and by Puri a doctor acting as the “scientific specialist”. Pilgrims formed a circle around an “altar” situated in the middle of the room. Each woman’s “priestess kit” for this meeting included dried menstrual blood collected on cotton. Those who had forgotten dried menstrual blood and those who had reached the menopause would use their arterial blood for the offering. Puri, the doctor of the group, would prick them, with the needles used by diabetics for glucose tests, to obtain drops.

---

<sup>3</sup> See Fedele 2013a for a detailed description of this pilgrimage, Mary Magdalene’s link to the Sainte-Baume and also for a more detailed description of the rituals considered in this text.

<sup>4</sup> Most of the pilgrims’ beliefs coincided with those of the American Neopagan and feminist spirituality movement described by Cynthia Eller (1993), Sarah M. Pike (2001, 2004) and others.

Puri explained that the blood of all the women would be mixed together in a solution of water and alcohol inside the chalice, in this way creating a unified “mother tincture”. Following principles adapted from homeopathy, this tincture was diluted, by putting a single drop in a 30 ml bottle of water and alcohol. This dilution excluded any health risk, augmented the “power” of the original tincture and transformed the “information” contained in each woman’s blood, making it “more subtle”.

The following day, every pilgrim was to take some time to shake the bottle, mentally transferring everything she wanted to transform and let go in her life. This process would foster the creation of a “group soul”, and the obtained dilution would help women heal their wounds and transform harmful attitudes.

The creative mixture of homeopathic principles and DNA science proposed by Puri did not puzzle me alone. Pilgrims looked rather lost after her explanations and expressed doubts. Dana admitted that at first she herself had felt overwhelmed by this DNA approach, but she said that Puri, “who had researched the issue”, had experienced the power of it and that more and more people all over the world were using it. DNA aside, Dana said that the most important thing was that the ritual would create a sisterhood based on a bond of blood and also connect the pilgrims with the women of the previous pilgrimage, two years before. As in other critical situations when the group became disoriented, Clara took control, and in her direct way brought things down to earth again: pilgrims would offer their blood to “Mother Earth” as women in ancient times did when they ploughed the fields, letting their menstrual outflow fall into the furrow they had created.

It would be too long to describe the rest of this ritual in detail, suffice it to say that after purifying and blessing the blood with the smoke of copal (Mexican aromatic plant), each woman moved towards the chalice on her knees and put the blood into the chalice<sup>5</sup>.

The following night the women made a common offering of their blood to Mother Earth in the wood of the Sainte-Baume. After an elaborate ceremony during which each woman was cleansed and entered the ritual circle according to age, everyone drank from a chalice that contained Provençal wine to which some drops of the blood dilution had been added. Elsewhere I discussed how this ritual of offering mirrored in many ways the Eucharist, and served as a sort of ritual inversion of the Christian conceptualization of God and its condemnation of menstruation (2013:169-186, 2014).

---

<sup>5</sup> See Fedele 2013:145-190 for a detailed description and analysis of these rituals.

## Ritual narratives and uncertainty

In referring to the crafted rituals I apply the word “ritual” broadly to those spiritual practices that were identified as such by the spiritual practitioners themselves and were meant to establish a contact with metaempirical beings and obtain insight, empowerment and healing. As we have seen, the rituals were not repetitive and stereotyped but rather created *ad hoc* for each situation. Following Élisabeth Claverie’s analysis of French pilgrims traveling to Medjugorje (2003) and along the lines of French pragmatic sociologists, I do not regard social actors (and in this case ritual actors) as passive victims of the social milieu they grew up in or of the theories related to the spirituality they had embraced. Ritual participants are equipped to engage with and be critical of reality; before accepting theories and rules, they challenge them. Hence during my research I was particularly interested in the way spiritual practitioners related to certain theories and the process that led them to accept or refuse them in establishing a personal set of theories, behaviors and ritual actions.

The ways people tell about rituals are the product of a complex process of interpretation. The participants’ intentions, experiences, and analyses of rituals help us to understand how the rituals work and how participants creatively transform the sequence suggested by the leader. I agree with Ronald Grimes that “there is no good reason to exclude ritual narratives, especially when participants themselves tell autobiographical stories as a way of making sense of a rite. (...) Since people tell personal stories about passages, their accounts constitute a legitimate part of the meaning of the rites.” (2000:10) Moreover it is mainly through ritual narratives that we can gain a glimpse of the uncertainty experienced by its participants. We can also assess to what extent the participant engaged in the ritual and what strategies she used to put to test the effectiveness of the ritual or neutralize doubts that prevented her from fully enjoying the ritual, like in Maria Antònia’s case below.

At the time of the pilgrimage in summer 2004, Maria Antònia, a Catalan pilgrim in her early fifties, had just entered menopause. Her last period had come in July 2003, and she had accepted this change and had not felt worried about the fact that she could not bring along her menstrual blood. Antònia had felt at ease during the DNA ritual, she told me that it seemed to her as if she already knew what she had to do, as if this formed part of her. During the ritual celebrated inside the wood however at least at the beginning she had some difficulties:

*When the time came to make the personal offering I was slightly nervous. I saw the other women going towards the center before me and began to wonder whether I would be able to do the ritual. (...)I began to worry that I would not be able to do what I was supposed to do.*

*And I was going through a bad moment, as if I were disconnected from that internal explosion I had felt before.(...) But in the very moment I went down all my anxiety disappeared. (...) Again I had the feeling that I had had the night before, that I knew exactly what I had to do and to say. I had no doubts; this means, I again felt like the Goddess. (June 4, 2005)*

According to Antònia, at first she felt incompetent and only after a while could she enjoy the ritual. Other pilgrims as well criticized the complexity of this ritual and said how hard it was to engage with it fully. They had received only general explanations about how to do the ritual, and several told me that they did not know how they were supposed to behave. When I shared my doubts with Sol after the ritual, this squatter in her early thirties told me: “It’s not important, the seed remains”, explaining that the exact ritual gestures were not so relevant and that the effects of the ritual would act as a seed that would slowly start to germinate.

I soon discovered that there were as many versions of the exact ritual sequence of the ritual made in the wood as there were pilgrims. As I could observe also on other occasions what mattered for the spiritual practitioners were not the precise ritual gestures or the enunciation of a precise script but the symbols (chalice, circle of women, candle, etc.), the symbolic actions (drinking from the cup, speaking to the group, standing at the center of the circle, etc.), and the effects (cf. Houseman 2007, 2010). Far from taking for granted the ritual’s effectiveness, the pilgrims approached the ritualization process critically, comparing its supposed effects with their energy perceptions during and after the offering.

Also other pilgrims had felt uncomfortable and incompetent during the ritual offering. A committed group member in her fifties, Felicia, had enjoyed the DNA ritual and felt particularly disappointed by her failure to become attuned to the ritual in the wood.

Felicia explained to me that she tended to worry about the way the rituals were performed. As one of the eldest and most committed members of the Goddess Wood, she felt responsible for the well-being of the pilgrims and the correct performance of the ritual sequence; this gave her a totally different perspective. Since she was the second pilgrim to enter the circle, she soon realized that most pilgrims were cold, sitting barefoot on the cold earth. Most of them were not used to sitting still for so long without being able to lean on something. For Felicia the script of the ritual had not been respected, and unlike Maria Antònia she was unable to neutralize her doubts:

*If there is a ritual gesture I like it to be done as precisely as possible, but we had to invoke the seven directions and there were people who did it well and others who seemed to me not to do it properly and this also distracted me. And I suffered. It was not so much because of whether the invocation was done properly or not, but rather that if you do something feeling comfortable there is much more beauty in it, and for the circle it is better to see beautiful gestures than to see that the person who is doing it [the gesture of invoking] is suffering because she does not know whether she is supposed to do it this way or that. (June 17, 2005)*

Like Antònia and Felicia, Ruth, sitting next to me in the age-ordered circle of the offering, mentioned the risk of being distracted from the ritual by doubts and questions. When I asked Ruth to tell about her pilgrimage experience, she answered that she was probably not the right person to talk to because she did not feel any particular connection with Mary Magdalene. She had chosen to join the pilgrimage “to see what it was and to spend some time with her friend Carme”, and was not following “a deeper spiritual calling”. I considered Ruth’s point of view particularly interesting because she represented a kind of “borderline pilgrim” who joined the trip out of curiosity without great expectations or aims. Ruth represents a good example of the “ritual semi-engagement” (2013) that Simon Coleman has described as “lateral participation” (2009, 2013).

From the beginning of the pilgrimage Ruth felt that if she took the ritual and its implications too literally she would not benefit from it. Like other pilgrims in similar situations, she decided not to give too much importance to Dana’s and Puri’s explanations and to concentrate on a more abstract, “symbolic” level. She concluded that, as Clara had said, the most important thing was that women were celebrating a ritual together.

*Every time I saw that little bottle [with the blood dilution] I said to myself “what are we doing?” [She laughs]. (...) And the offering, I did not get that either (...) offering my own blood, I asked myself: “How can my blood, as small as it is [without importance] in something as big as that”. But in reality it [making the offering] was like giving thanks for the experience we were having. If you saw it on that level [of giving thanks], then it could make some kind of sense, but if you considered it on a normal level you got lost and began to think “what am I doing and what is happening?”. (...)*

From Ruth’s comments it emerges that one of the features that allowed the pilgrims to overcome their doubts was the emphasis on the gendered body and on building community. Ruth could not believe that her own blood could be important in such a vast context and preferred to focus,



as Felicia had done, on the importance of the group and on the fact that the bleeding was something she had in common with all other women.

By the time the group reached the hostel it was past midnight. As the hungry pilgrims cooked and ate in the common kitchen, they excitedly recounted their feelings and experiences during the ritual. Despite the difficulties and perplexities a new sense of communion seemed to have formed among them, and they kept repeating: “Now we are blood sisters”.

After dinner Dana invited pilgrims to a short gathering in the common room before going to sleep. Suddenly one late pilgrim entered the room with her dog which was treated by the women as “the only male of the group” and the pilgrimage mascot. She explained us that her dog had just eaten a used tampon found in the bathroom. “He too wanted to be part of the ritual of sharing the menstrual blood!” The dog’s behavior was interpreted as a further proof of the power of the ritual.

## **Discussion**

In the last twenty years scholars have pointed out that ritual has become increasingly visible and important in both religious and non-religious contexts (among others: Aune and de Marinis 1996; Grimes 2000; Fellous 2001; Dianteill et al. 2004; Grimes et al. 2011). The growing significance and diffusion of ritual in Western, increasingly globalized societies has brought with it theoretical and methodological challenges. However, as Coleman observes, “we should not go too far in claiming that ritual suddenly faces fresh challenges in the context of late modernity: that would be to reinstate long-discredited distinctions between societies of tradition and societies of change” (2013).

Scholars such as Talal Asad (1993) and Catherine Bell (1993, 1997) have shown that not only rituals but also the way we theorize about ritual are strictly related to historical processes. We cannot assume that rituals have followed fixed patterns in the past and that only in recent times people have started creatively appropriating and changing them. In fact, historical and anthropological studies about vernacular Catholicism and Christianity<sup>6</sup> suggest that in the past as in the present lived religion and ritual are heterogeneous and changing phenomena<sup>7</sup>. What appears to be new is the extent to which such creativity is legitimated, assumed and encouraged in contemporary spirituality.

Ritual creativity deploying scholarly/esoteric knowledge is an important feature of the kind of spirituality that has attracted a growing number of individuals in the West since the 1960s. Unlike certain scholars reluctant to study new modalities of ritual action I do not believe that ritual necessarily excludes experimentation and creativity; in fact as we can see from the historical analysis

---

<sup>6</sup> Among others: Christian 1972, 2011; Bynum 1987, 1991; Badone 1990.

<sup>7</sup> On contemporary lived religion see Mc Guire 2008.

of the Christian Eucharist, many if not most rituals are in their contemporary form the outcome of a long process of experimentation (Bell 1989). Both ritual and religion can only be understood if we can grasp the historical and social conditions in which they were created. What makes contemporary spirituality's forms of ritual particularly interesting is that one can observe a process of religious and ritual creativity in the making, listening to ritual participants who self-consciously engage in this creative process. Rather than dismiss this kind of religious and ritual creativity as yet another form of romantic re-enchantment of the world or criticize its disconnect with tradition, social scientists and religious scholars can examine it to learn how to confront rituals emerging in plural Western societies that are diversified, unstable, and exposed to secular influences.

Dana's pilgrims and also other spiritual practitioners I met during my fieldwork readily admitted that they had created their rituals by mixing together elements from different traditions. From their point of view this did not compromise the ritual's potential or actual power. Like in the case of other "new" religious phenomena in the past and present, the pilgrims were confronted with the challenge of creating rituals that were new but at the same time related to a tradition (see for instance Aubin-Boltanski in this volume). My interlocutors felt that their rituals had been created by receiving inspiration from the past, with the clear intent to obtain a ritual structure that, while not identical, was "equivalent" to previous (in this case pre-Christian) rituals.

The rituals I joined during my fieldwork in Spain, Italy and Portugal had been created by and for persons who were highly critical of established religions (especially Catholicism). They were often worried to end up participating in ritual actions that are rigid, controlling and ultimately "religious". Having struggled to free themselves from the Catholic beliefs they had received from their parents (Fedele 2013a:123-144) these spiritual practitioners did not want to give away their power to an external authority or to feel that they were blindly accepting the dogmas dictated by a religious leader. Explaining the efficacy of their rituals in scientific terms allowed Goddess Wood members to feel that they were not just making a leap into faith by participating in the rituals and believing in its healing effects. However, as we have seen from the ethnographic description of the DNA ritual, the "scientific" explanation of the ritual had an ambiguous effect; if on the one hand it allowed them to make sense of it, on the other side it made some of them feel that they were "too much inside their head"; they therefore decided to translate the scientific reference to a more symbolical / psychological language that did not prevent them to experience the healing effect of the ritual (Houseman 2007, 2010). This coming and going between science, psychology and religion in order to optimize the rational understanding of the ritual on the one hand and the physical perception of the ritual's effects on the other kept emerging during the fieldwork.

In books, workshops and ritual ceremonies spiritual practitioners were explicitly encouraged not to take anything for granted and to accept theories only if they worked for them (among others: Fedele and Knibbe 2013; Bowman and Sutcliffe 2000; Pike 2001). My interlocutors were also used to more or less formalized moments of sharing during which they could discuss their spiritual experiences but also solve problems and doubts or even express their criticism. For this reason they offer us a privileged access to the uncertainties intrinsic to the ritual experience.

Similarly to the Limburg religious groups discussed by Kim Knibbe in this volume my interlocutors perceived certainty as something potentially dangerous that evoked concepts such as, mind-control, giving up one's own power and ultimately the phantom of religious domination and even fundamentalism. As a consequence uncertainty was not perceived as a lack of faith or as something to be avoided but rather as an attitude to be cultivated. This conceptualization of religious certainty as potentially dangerous seems to be directly related to secularizing processes and a conceptualization of religion and faith as opposed to science and rationality. In this context uncertainty and humans' capacities to doubt and put to the test appear as useful tools to overcome the risks of religious domination and the loss of one's power of choice.

However, also certainty bears with it problematic issues. My interlocutors often reprimanded me for "being too much in my head" (Fedele 2013b) and criticized scientists because they opposed spirituality and used only the left, rational, masculine side of their brains thereby ignoring the intuitive, feminine side. Theorists and practitioners of contemporary spirituality (Fedele and Knibbe 2013), clearly state that they want to offer an alternative to the disenchantment of the world brought about by science, rationalism and secularism. As such spirituality ends up being inextricably linked to secularity and Peter van der Veer has argued that the spiritual and the secular "are produced simultaneously as two connected alternatives to institutionalized religion in Euro-American modernity" (2009).

For my interlocutors religion, science and secularization were dangerous partners that they criticized and opposed but could not do without. Directly related to these three elements, certainty appeared as risky but also desirable at some moments. Especially before the beginning of a ritual, participants were often invited to "stop dwelling in their minds" and allow themselves to just "experience" and "surrender to the power of the ceremony". They should approach the ritual believing that it would work, knowing that once it was over they were free to evaluate if the ritual had really worked and eventually dismiss it if it had not. So it seemed that for the ritual to work a momentary suspension of doubt was necessary. As we have seen Maria Antònia explained that she could only start to enjoy the ritual once she stopped listening to her fearful thoughts; Felicia on the

other hand felt that she had not managed to successfully engage in the ritual because she kept being distracted by superficial issues. In this context even if doubt appeared as a powerful partner against “religion”, it became a problematic companion during the ritual.

As Simon Coleman has argued referring to his research on pilgrims to the shrine of Walsingham (UK), contrary to classical anthropological theories describing ritual as a “means of mitigating the stresses of risk and uncertainty” (2007:44), ritual may be perceived as “productive of risk”, as generating feelings of uncertainty and incompetence. As it emerges from the pilgrims’ reactions to the rituals celebrated at La Sainte-Baume, “distance from, or temporary reconciliation with, ritual forms is subject to constant negotiations and a recovery of the agency of the individual mediated through the body, through certain forms of viewing“ (Coleman 2007:48) and also through the use of irony and play (Coleman and Elsner 1998).

For my interlocutors in Spain, Italy and Portugal ritual seemed to imply a constant shifting from uncertainty to certainty and back. If certainty brought with it the previously analyzed risks related to “religion”, uncertainty implied the risk of ritual failure. Adapting Knibbe’s argument in this volume (referring to Jackson 1998) it seems that also for my interlocutors it was important to establish the limit between certainty and uncertainty, because this helped them to recognize the moment when they could suspend doubt and jump into the ritual experience being fully able to enjoy it.

At the same time this necessity to suspend uncertainty in order to fully engage in the ritual also provided a sort of “empty point” (*point vide*) in the ritual (see Agnès Clerc-Renaud in this volume referring to Severi 2007) that allowed the participants to make sense of possible doubts or perceptions of failure after the ritual. If after the ritual the participant felt that it had not worked properly (like in Felicia’s case) this could be explained in terms of the participants’ inability to suspend doubt and/or the leader’s inability to foster the suspension of doubt, rather than to ritual inefficacy.

## **Conclusion**

Ritual can create meaning that is fragmented and diverse (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994) and this was particularly the case for my interlocutors who had grown up in traditionally Catholic countries such as Portugal, Spain or Italy and struggled to break free from the limitations they explicitly related with their Catholic background (Fedele 2013a:123-144). Analyzing the ritual narratives of Spanish pilgrims influenced by the Goddess spirituality movement I have shown how they put to test the efficacy of menstrual rituals, came to terms with their feelings of incompetence and negotiated the rituals’ meanings and effects.

Contemporary spirituality stresses the supremacy of *experience* over belief and participants in crafted rituals seem to be more at ease talking about feelings of uncertainty and incompetence. For my interlocutors it was easier to admit their disconnection or their doubts because they had been encouraged by their spiritual leaders not to take anything for granted but to put theories and practices to the test (Bell 1997:241; Houseman 2007, 2010; Fedele and Knibbe 2013). Analyzing their ambiguous relationship with religion but also with science and secularization I have shown how spiritual practitioners conceptualized certainty as potentially dangerous (Knibbe this volume) but also as a necessary ingredient for ritual efficacy. In this context doubt emerges as a powerful tool against the monolithic, male-dominated truth offered by science and religion but also as an obstacle to the kind of mindless surrender necessary during ritual. Ritual participants therefore found themselves having to engage in a complicated ritual dance in which they joined hands alternatively with uncertainty and certainty.

Drawing on Simon Coleman's analysis of ritual (2002, 2009, 2013, and Elsner 1998) I have argued that the uncertainty that some ritual participants experience is not exclusive to crafted rituals in contemporary spirituality but represents an aspect of rituals created in plural, increasingly secularized Western contexts that has received little attention from social scientists so far. It would be interesting to explore what role uncertainty plays in other contemporary rituals such as those created to celebrate life passages in a different way (e.g. Grimes 2000) or to make sense of events left unaddressed by established religious traditions such as miscarriage (Fellous 2001), menopause (Fedele 2013) or the death of a pet (Brandes 2009). Ultimately the issues we discussed here raise the question whether participants in more established, traditional rituals also engage both with certainty and uncertainty, alternating between faith and doubt.

- Asad, Talal. 1993. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Aune, Michael B. and De Marinis, Valerie, eds. 1996. *Religious and Social Ritual: Interdisciplinary Explorations*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Badone, Ellen. ed. 1990. *Religious Orthodoxy and Popular Faith in European Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Bell, Catherine. 1989. "Ritual, Change and Changing Rituals." *Worship* 63 (1): 31–41.
- Bell, Catherine. 1992. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. New York: Oxford University Press
- Bell, Catherine. 1997. *Ritual. Perspectives and Dimensions*. New York: Oxford
- Bowman, Marion and Sutcliffe, Steven J. eds. 2000. *Beyond New Age. Exploring Alternative Spirituality*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Brandes, Stanley 2009 „The Meaning of American Pet Cemetery Gravestones“ *Ethnology* 48:99-118.
- Bynum, Caroline Walker. 1987. *Holy Feast, Holy Fast. The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- — —. 1991. *Fragmentation and Redemption. Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*. New York: Zone Books.
- Christian, William A. Jr. 1989 [1972]. *Person and God in a Spanish Valley*. Rev. ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Christian, William A. Jr.. 2011. *Divine Presence in Spain and Western Europe 1500–1960. Visions, Religious Images and Photographs*. Budapest: Central European Press.
- Claverie, Élisabeth. 2003. *Les guerres de la Vierge. Une anthropologie des apparitions*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Coleman, Simon 2013 "Ritual Remains: Studying Contemporary Pilgrimage," in: *A Companion to the Anthropology of Religion*. J. Boddy and M. Lambek eds., London: Wiley Blackwell.
- Coleman, Simon. 2009. "On Mirrors, Masks and Traps: Ambiguity, Risk and 'Lateral Participation' in Ritual." *Journal of Ritual Studies* 23 (2): 43–51.
- Coleman, Simon and Elsner, J. 1998. "Performing Pilgrimage: Walsingham and the Ritual Construction of Irony," in: *Ritual, Performance, Media*. F. Hughes-Freeland ed., 46–65. New York: Routledge.
- Dianteill, Erwan et al. 2004 *La modernité rituelle. Rites politiques et religieux des sociétés modernes*. Paris: L'Harmattan
- Eller, Cynthia. 1993. *Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Fedele, Anna. 2013a. *Looking for Mary Magdalene. Alternative Pilgrimage and Ritual Creativity at Catholic Shrines in France*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- — —. 2013b. "2012: The Spiritualized Prophecy That Could not Fail", *Religion and Society: Advances in Research*, 4
- — —. 2014 "Reversing Eve's Curse. Mary Magdalene Pilgrims and the Creative Ritualization of Menstruation" *Journal of Ritual Studies* 28.2.

- Fedele, Anna and Kim Knibbe, eds. 2013. *Gender and Power in Contemporary Spirituality. Ethnographic Approaches*. New York: Routledge.
- Fellous, Michèle. 2001. *À la recherche de nouveaux rites*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Basic Books.
- Grimes, Ronald. 2000. *Deeply Into the Bone; Re-inventing Rites of Passage*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Grimes, Ronald et al. 2011 *Ritual, Media, and Conflict*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press
- Handelman, Don and Galina Linquist. 2004. *Ritual in Its Own Right. Exploring the Dynamics of Transformation*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Houseman, Michael. 2007. "Menstrual Slaps and First Blood Celebrations. Inference, Simulation and the Learning of Ritual," in *Learning Religion. Anthropological Approaches*. D. Berliner and R. Sarró, eds., 31–48. Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- — —. 2010. "Des rituels contemporains de première menstruation," in *Ethnologie Française* 40 (1): 57–66.
- Humphrey, Caroline and Laidlaw, James. 1994. *The Archetypal Actions of Ritual: A Theory of Ritual Illustrated by the Jain Rite of Worship*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- McGuire, Meredith. 2008. *Lived Religion. Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pike, Sarah M. 2001. *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search for Community*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- — —. 2004. *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rappaport, Roy. 1999. *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Van der Veer, Peter 2009 "Spirituality in Modern Society," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 76, no. 4: 1097–1120.
- Wood, Matthew. 2007. *Possession, Power and the New Age: Ambiguities of Authority in Neoliberal Societies*. First. Ashgate.